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## PEASANTS IN TRANSITION. FORMS AND METHODS OF PEASANT RESISTANCE IN SOVIET ARMENIA IN 1929- 1930S

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Armenian realities of dekulakization<sup>1</sup> processes, legitimized by the policy of forced collectivization in the USSR in 1929-1930, still remain one of the areas in the history of Soviet Armenia that need more in-depth research. The socialist economic restructuring of the village, presented by the Bolsheviks as an effective policy of modernization, gradually led to the changes in the peasant lifestyle. This reorganization of the villages caused various forms of reaction among the peasants, the largest wave of which rose in 1928-1932, during the period of the first five-year plan (*первая пятилетка*), in response to the dekulakization process. It was manifested in different ways of resistance: armed and peaceful, boycotts, terrorist acts, as well as in passive or everyday forms. This study examines the main forms and methods of passive and active peasant resistance in Soviet Armenia, the motives and causes of armed resistance not only as an act and movement in defense of individual property, but also as an instrument for peasant identity preservation.

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<sup>1</sup> The liquidation of kulaks as a class.

## On the Eve of the Resistance

The role of, or situation of the peasantry in the process of socio-economic transformation of the Soviet village in the late 1920s - early 1930s –is one of the most controversial topics of Soviet history. For more comprehensive study this process needs to be evaluated not only by the economic aspects, but the directed social changes, the creation of new rural class, the construction of a new rural reality as one of the most important strategies of domestic policy of the central government. The socialist reorganization of the village was the main tool of industrial modernization in the Soviet Union, amounting to nationalization of the agricultural sector. It dramatically increased the process of depeasantization- which was the leitmotif of the entire political and social history of the Soviet state, especially in the scope of the industrialization of the country.

The socialist restructuring of the village included an inevitable component of changes in the peasant culture: including rural traditions, intercommunal, family, religious, and social relations, self-perception.

Although the Communist Party represented collectivization as an important prerequisite for the socialist transformation of the village, in reality it meant a declaration of war by self-proclaimed modern, progressive forces against rural culture as part of the struggle to eliminate rural backwardness<sup>2</sup>. In the middle of November 1929, the Bolshevik leadership began mass collectivization in the country, and on January 13, 1930, the project of the Secretariat of the Central Committee of the Communist Party (of Bolsheviks) of Armenia added religion and religious clerics to the list of targets of dekulakization<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> According to the directive, signed in 1929 by the secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union L. Kaganovich, the religious organizations were announced the legally operating counter-revolutionary forces; see S. N. Savel'ev, 'Bog i komissary', *Sociologicheskie issledovanija*, 1991, # 2, pp. 34-45. According to the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Armenia letter 'Strengthening Anti-Religious Work' signed in March 14, 1929 the anti-Soviet elements: the kulak, the NEPman, and the clergy led by the Dashnaks'utyun were united against the Soviet authorities. As part of a mass collectivization program, priests were subject to expropriation and expulsion from their localities. The persecution and repression of clergy continued brutally, churches and monasteries were closed, and clergy, like other social groups, were subjected to mass imprisonment and deportation: See A. Manukyan, op., pp. 28-42.

<sup>3</sup> According to A. Manukyan, in the 1930s, 161 priests served in the Armenian Apostolic, Armenian Catholic and Armenian Evangelical churches were repressed in Armenia. 91 of them had been shot. See. A. Manukyan, op., pp. 128-129. For more details on Soviet policy toward churches in Armenia, see S. Stepanyants', *Hay Araqelakan Ekeghets'in stalinyan brnapetut'yan oroq*, Yerevan. Apolon, 1994; A. Manukyan, *Hay Araqelakan Ekeghets'u brnadatvats hokevorakannere 1930-1938 est PAK-I pastatghteri*, Yerevan. Amrots, 1997; S. Behbudyan, ed., *Vaveragrer hay ekeghets'u patmut'yan (1921-1938)*, Yerevan, 1994.

Rural culture, which included religious, family, inter-communal traditions, was a unique heart<sup>4</sup> of a dissent and became the symbol of the village's autonomy. The measures against religion and the church during the years of mass collectivization were actually targeting the rural culture. The Armenian church had not only been a religious institution, but also a community center in the village and community. During the centuries in time of different conflicts in self-defense zones the church also served as an arsenal. This phenomenon became more noticeable during the forced collectivization, when the churches became a social platform for the uprising, a place for rallies against the Soviet regime and also for discussions of the rebellious peasants<sup>5</sup>. In this respect, measures against religion and the church have become the most striking and vivid manifestation of the policy of attacking rural culture and over the years of mass forced collectivization, which had turned into a real war against religion and religious symbols.

The collectivization and the socialist reorganization of the village provoked various forms of reaction within the peasantry, shaping the culture of resistance, through which some specificities of interaction of the peasantry and the elites were exposed. Its uniqueness was that, along with its flexibility, adaptability and the passive or everyday forms of resistance, it was the imposition of the will of the peasantry to the authorities.

The biggest wave of active-passive resistance in the 1930s in Soviet Armenia rose during the period of the first five-year plan, in particular in 1930 in response to the anti-religious as well as the dekulakization policy. The resistance manifested itself in riots, uprisings, rallies (armed and peaceful), boycotts, terrorist acts (arson, assault and murder), as well as in passive or everyday forms: foot dragging, sabotage, dissimulation, false-compliance, feigned ignorance, slander, sabotage, escapes, spreading rumors and so forth which, according to Scott, were the key to communicating with dominant cultures.

### **The Forms of the Resistance**

It should be noted that against the background of forced collectivization, seizures of property and deportations, the political situation in the village was extremely aggravated. The discontent of the peasantry in various regions made the underground groups of the Dashnaktsutyun Party become

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<sup>4</sup> J. C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990, p. 11.

<sup>5</sup> *Khorhrdayin Hayastan*, 9 February, 1930.

more active. Moreover, also some anti-Bolshevik forces penetrated into Armenia from abroad and join the movement. These forms of resistance have been described as a terrorist “bandit” anti-government movement.

According to the secret reference, in 1930 only in 2 months and 14 days 33 mass demonstrations took place in Armenia, 20 of which were against collectivization, including 34 terrorist acts (4 murders, 1 wound, 12 beatings, 1 assassination, 16 terrorist acts of property), 5 leaflets in January-February, 1 called for the uprising, the rest against collectivization<sup>6</sup>. The active armed form of resistance was strong especially in Daralagiaz region, it actually abandoned the collectivization and the process of dekulakization and reached its climax in the summer of 1931. In general, the armed resistance in Northern Armenia (Akhta, Dilijan, and Lori) and in the Southern Armenia (Daralagiaz, Zangezur) was possible because of the mountainous terrain and the possibility to cross the border. In the rebellion of the northern part of Armenia the Dashnaks played no important role but in the south, they were directed and supplied by the Dashnaks from Persia. However, the rebellion was in general of a spontaneous nature, lacking the proper coordination<sup>7</sup>.

Referring to the passive forms of resistance to collectivization the most common type was self-dekulakization, in particular, the destruction or distribution of collective property between other houses, the slaughtering livestock, the cutting down trees. This form of self-dekulakization, which is reported in a state secret document, states that in 1931 in the village of Golkend, Dilijan region the peasants slaughtered 700 livestock, and sold 145 cattle in Basargechar. It is reported that in 1932 in Akhta, Aparan, Basargechar, Marduni, Nor Bazyazet peasants slaughtered about half of the livestock in these regions.<sup>8</sup>

Another form of everyday resistance was working within old traditional groups on the kolkhoz lands. These groups consisted mainly of close relatives, friends and family members. In many cases, the villager, participating in the obligatory work of the collective farm, resorted to cunning, continuing to cultivate the land that belonged to him before collectivization, or cultivated a small plot of land near his house, thereby paralyzing the obligatory collective farm work. A passive form of resistance or a way to self-dekulakization at that time was leaving the collective farms, going to the mountains, or escaping from the village. The villagers, known as kulaks, fled before, during

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<sup>6</sup> *'Sovershenno sekretno': Lubianka-Stalinu o polozenii v strane (1922-1934 gg.)* v.8, part 2, 1930, Moscow, 2008, pp. 1258-1344.

<sup>7</sup> A. Khanchian, *H.K. (b)K. Kentkomi hashvetvoutyoune 8-rd hamagoumaroum*, Yerevan, 1932, pp. 144-145.

<sup>8</sup> Armenia (S.S.R.), *Sovet Narodnykh komissarov, Materialy k otchetu pravitel'stva SSR Armenii (1929-1934) k XIII s'ezdu sovetov*, Yerevan, 1935, pp. 160-169 (tables).

and after the forced collectivization. Even the passport system at the beginning could not control this process.

Relying on its own institution and instruments of protest, the culture of rural resistance has turned to oral-written news (rumors, leaflets) into a weapon of active protest. These rumors, containing a warning and alarming element, mainly spoke of the impending collapse of the Soviet regime, its anti-religious and immoral nature, as well as the ever more imminent approach of a new war.

It is important to note that with the beginning of dekulakization, the term "kulak" acquired the political connotation, it was already an ideological figure. Searching for "kulaks" became an instrument of psychological pressure on the peasantry and prerequisites of repressions. For activists and party members who wanted to prematurely report about 100% collectivization of their village, there was not a complicated theoretical question to define kulaks. Those who were against collectivization were kulaks, regardless of their financial status.

In this new situation, the villagers tried to protect each other. Many villages rallied to support their relatives, friends or neighbors who were accused of being kulaks. The phrase "we have no kulaks" sounded from all villages, when the villagers realized that the term "kulak" did not separate them, but, on the contrary, was a powerful instrument of equalization, since the interests of the whole peasantry were endangered. Moreover, the support or defense of the kulaks was a hidden and dangerous form of protest, interpreted by the Soviet government as counter-revolutionary activity or "sub-kulaks" (подкулачники, подкулачники) machinations. The denial of the existence of kulaks was a hidden form of peasant resistance, a hidden defensive action on behalf of the entire village.

In this regard, it should be noted that the unification of Armenian-Azeri peasants of the Soviet Armenia villages registered especially during the clashes against outsiders (in this case the party activists). As Teodor Shanin describes here the peasantry acted as a unit, a class<sup>9</sup>. In 1929-30, the united rebellion of the Armenian-Azeri peasants in the Daralagyaz region against the "destructive atheist government" was carried out under the slogan "struggle for religion, the unity of the Bible and the Quran."<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup>T. Shanin, ed., *Peasants and peasant societies: selected readings*, Oxford [Oxfordshire]; NY, BasilBlackwell, 1987, p. 329.

<sup>10</sup> *Sovetskaja derevnja glazami VChK-OGPU-NKVD. 1918—1939. Dokumenty i materialy*. In 4-volumes/ V. 3. book. 1. p. 279.

## **Conclusion**

The process of mass collectivization and dekulakization targeted not only “kulaks”, rural clergy, but also rural communities by extermination of the rural elite, rural authorities, eliminating the traditional communal form of farming, eliminating rural markets and mills - all phenomena that could pose a threat to Soviet power.

These new realities brought to the various forms of rural resistance which did not develop in isolation. It was a form of protest against state building during the collectivization period. These forms of protest were a direct response to the policies of the central government in the countryside; they could be active, passive, hidden, disguised, and even supposed. The stronger was the pressure from the state, the more severe the village resisted. If in the case of passive resistance, the state, considering the foot dragging as a purely traditional way of behavior, in many cases made some concessions in terms of a rigid political economy, then in the case of active / military actions this inevitably led to repressions.

Changing the traditional methods of farming, destroying the social strata of the rural population, changing the social strata of the rural population, introducing an atmosphere of internal enmity and hatred, subordination of the inner life of the rural community to the Chekists, stabilization of the atmosphere of fear of the authorities, the implementation of absolute obedience, were directed to the formation of the new image of "Soviet peasants", the construction of soviet identity. In this regard, the ways and methods of peasant resistance should be defined not only as an act and movement in defense of individual property, but also as an instrument for rural identity preservation.

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